

Chairman Jared Huffman
Subcommittee on Water, Oceans, and Wildlife
Committee on Natural Resources
Oversight Hearing on “*Federal and State Efforts to Restore the Salton Sea*”
September 24, 2020

Opening Statement

We are here today for an oversight hearing to examine the current federal and state efforts to restore the Salton Sea through Phase 1 of the Salton Sea Management Program – a 10-year plan involving a range of activities for habitat creation and dust management through 2028. As we’ll hear today, these restoration efforts have significant implications for local public health, migratory birds, and endangered species.

The Salton Sea in Southern California covers well over 300 square miles. Since 1905, the Salton Sea has been fed by irrigation water runoff from agricultural fields. Decades ago, it was a recreational destination for fishing and boating. Today, the Sea is shrinking.

A combination of persistent drought, more efficient irrigation practices, water management obligations, and evaporation from the surface of this massive but shallow lake have led to a receding shoreline. Thousands of acres of exposed lakebed, known as playa, lay bare without treatment to suppress the dust that is whipped up from frequent high winds.

That dust contributes to a major air quality problem in the region. The sediments that have made their way to the Salton Sea through runoff include arsenic and other contaminants. When those sediments become airborne, they contribute to pollution caused by particulate matter from natural, urban, and agricultural sources. It’s saddening yet unsurprising that the Imperial Valley has a high rate of asthma, especially among children.

The Salton Sea is currently twice as salty as seawater, and the salinity is only increasing. There are no streams that flow out of the Sea, so salts and agricultural chemicals have become increasingly concentrated over time.

This has spelled trouble for the fish species that previously abounded in the Sea, which was once stocked to support recreation. While some fish still survive in the lake, populations are a fraction of what existed 20 years ago.

These problems extend to the more than 400 species of migratory birds that rely on the Salton Sea as a critical stop on the Pacific Flyway. The Sea provides the only habitat in the region for millions of migratory birds, including threatened and endangered species. The increasing salinity poses risks to the fish and invertebrate species that make up the birds' food source, while the continued retreat of the shoreline threatens their habitat.

Inflows to the Salton Sea are expected to continue to decrease. The Sea is projected to shrink another 45 square miles – an area the size of San Francisco – by the year 2030.

We will check in today with the State of California on the work they're doing to address these issues through Phase 1 of the Salton Sea Management Program. Along with federal agencies under this Committee's jurisdiction, the state is leading efforts to create habitat and suppress dust at the Sea. I look forward to hearing from two of the State's top officials overseeing this effort. We will also hear today from the Chairman of the Torres Martinez Desert Cahuilla Indians who can speak not just to the work being done at the Sea, but also to the federal government's fulfillment of its trust responsibilities.

This hearing is intended to examine both federal and state efforts to restore the Salton Sea. It is disappointing that the administration has chosen once again not to attend this Committee's proceedings. The Committee invited Commissioner Burman of the Bureau of Reclamation, which is the largest landholder at the Salton Sea. We also invited Director Skipwith of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which has a wildlife refuge at the Sea and is partnering with the state on wetland habitat creation. But neither are here today to tell us about the status of their agencies' work

because, in the midst of a global pandemic, the administration has chosen to deride our Committee for doing what so many responsible Americans have been forced to do this year – convene virtually to protect the health of ourselves and our communities. It is unfortunate that Commissioner Burman and Director Skipwith have declined the invitation to join us so that the public can hear about whether their agencies are meeting their responsibilities and carrying out their work at the Salton Sea effectively.

There are some who would call the Salton Sea an accident. It was, after all, created due to the failure of a major irrigation canal in 1905. But this perspective overlooks both history and present reality. This ancient lakebed, previously known as the Salton Sink, has intermittently filled over the past several thousand years. But more importantly, a dismissive viewpoint ignores the environmental justice imperative to ensure that local citizens have clean air to breathe, not polluted with arsenic and other contaminants. And, it ignores 400 species of migratory birds that stand to lose major habitat along the Pacific Flyway.

I look forward to learning more today about the work underway to address conditions at the Salton Sea.